THE NATIVE MUSIC OF AMERICAN SAMOA

By FRANCES DENSMORE

ONLY one song has been published at Pago Pago, American Samoa. This song is said to have been composed by the dashing Faatui, son of the chief Amituaui-Leasuasu, and the song was first sung by a group of young men of Apia, Samoa, at the departure of the popular American Admiral Kimberly, after the naval disaster of 1889. The title is "Tofa mai feleni" ("Goodby my friend"). Many different words are sung to the same tune, both in English and Samoan, and the melody is very popular throughout the South Seas and especially in Samoa.

In the edition of the song published by E. W. Tuedner of Pago Pago the words express the regret of one who is leaving the island, the second verse being typical of the poem:

Good-bye, Feleni, my barque sails away,
Away from fair Islands where all is bright and gay,
But I'll not forget you, nor this beloved land,
When far, far away upon my native land.

Chorus:

Oh, I never will forget you,
And sadly repeat my fond adieu,
Oh, I never will forget you,
To Samoa I bid adieu.

The melody is simple and pleasing, and many have heard it as a last farewell when leaving the tropical island. Ships of foreign nations sometimes call at Pago Pago and their bands play the "Tofa song," making it seem a different piece than when it is sung or played by the Samoans. Yet the Tofa song, with its gay front cover, is the place where East meets West in a kind of world fellowship through music.

The visiting ship sails away, the navy officials resume their routine duties, the native chiefs go back to their villages, and the Samoans return to their old songs.

An inquiry concerning the native music of American Samoa was made possible by a peculiar circumstance. Lieutenant M. E. Zimmerman, United States navy, and husband of the writer's cousin, was assigned to duty at Pago Pago and consented to obtain answers to a set of questions on primitive musical customs. The answers were secured from the court interpreter and corroborated by other Samoans, every effort being made to have the questions clearly understood and the answers correctly interpreted. While

this is a circuitous manner of studying Samoan music, the result is interesting as it shows resemblances between Samoan and other primitive music.

Two sorts of songs are in use in American Samoa: (1) a crystallized melody which is repeated without change and handed down from one generation to another; (2) a long narrative or speech, sung to an improvised melody. Chief in the first class are war songs; it is also said that new songs of this sort are composed from time to time. Songs of the second class usually relate to the work in progress, to children at play, or to any other interest of the hour. It was said that "work in the field, rowing, fishing, or riding in a bus is often accompanied by song."

In reply to a question about musical instruments it was said.:

The only native instrument now in use is a horn made of a sea shell and used by fishermen when a shark is caught. In the olden days reed instruments and drums were used. Some of the older men state that they recall these instruments but none exist on the island at the present time. It is believed that early missionaries obtained these instruments for a European museum.

The Samoans never sing solos, all their singing being in chorus.

It is interesting to note that the two types of songs used by the Samoans were found among the Filipino at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1904. This Filipino music was studied by the writer for about three weeks. A large amount of material was available, as the Filipino were singing almost constantly for the benefit of the public. Four tribes were under observation,—the Negrito, Igorot, Samal Moro, and Lanao Moro— and the songs of each were heard. In addition to songs that were clearly improvised (with and without accompaniment) there was heard a repeated melody with instrumental accompaniment, this being the Amba of the Negrito. A young Negrito who spoke broken English said they have "three songs," the Amba (an expression of happiness), the Uso (a love song), and the Undas (a funeral song). It was also said; "We make up songs about everything. We sing about the people who look at us. We sing 'how funny that fat man looks.' We make up these songs."[1]

A long narrative with improvised melody was the only form of song obtained from the Tule Indians of San Blas, Panama. The presence in Washington of a group of these people, commonly known as the "white Indians," made possible a study which would have been exceedingly difficult in their native land. Nine songs were recorded and transcribed either wholly or in part. One transcription was of a performance seven minutes in length. The nine recorded songs were said to be improvisations in both melody and

[1] Frances Densmore, The Music of the Filipinos, AA 8: 611, 642, 1906.

words, yet the singer followed a general pattern in each. There were no repetitions of rhythmic periods or long phrases in any song, but one contained a phrase of a single measure which occurred several times.[2]

The Ute Indians have two forms of song, a crystallized melody and a melodic narrative designated by the writer as "rudimentary song." The latter were long performances without a definite ending. The tones were chiefly those of the major triad and it appeared that the singer combined these according to her fancy. Yet there was a difference in the "songs" which corresponded with their subject. The story of a race between the tadpoles and the mice, and the melody said to have been sung by the prairie dogs, were rapid in tempo, with active melodic progression, while the story of the bear who stole the wolf's wife was sung to a heavier type of melody in a slower tempo. This class of song has been recorded only among the Ute and was sung by an old woman.[3] It has been mentioned in one or two other tribes but no one has been found who could sing the songs.

In the improvised songs of the Samoans, the songs of the Tule Indians of Panama, and the "rudimentary" Ute songs we have a distinct art form, the singer having a freedom and skill in his use of musical material that is not required in the repetitions of a set melody. It is to be regretted that more of these improvised songs have not been recorded, as the last person possessing the ability to sing them will soon have entered into the silence of the past.

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[2] Frances Densmore, Music of the Tule Indians of Panama, SI-MC 77, no. 11, 1926.
[3] Frances Densmore, Northern Ute Music, BAE-B 75: 200–205, 1922.